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WEEKLY NEWS

ONE DOLLAR



Mario Naves

Serious Fun

In the past few years, there's been a tendency for painters to exhibit, alongside their recent efforts on canvas, a temporary wall painting created specifically for its venue. This trend is an-if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em phenomenon, indicative of nothing so much as the painter's insecurity in the face of an art scene dominated by the site-specific, the object-oriented and the sensational. It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I attended *Wall*, an exhibition at Metaphor Contemporary Art: Sculptor Jim Osman and painter Nancy Olivier had been invited to transform the gallery's environs by painting on one wall apiece. My trepidation was unwarranted. Mr. Osman and Ms. Olivier have acquitted themselves honorably. Mr. Osman, whose fascination with cut-rate architecture is tongue-in-cheek but devoid of condescension, has created a geometric fresco reminiscent of the Williamsburg Housing Murals on display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Ms. Olivier, who's done wall paintings before, overlaps looping calligraphy, satiny grids and vertical drips to impressive decorative effect.

Still, both artists lose something when straying from, in Mr. Osman's case, the three-dimensional and, in Ms. Olivier's, the physical parameters of the painting support. Indeed, *Wall* underscores how pivotal the right format is to an artist's vision, how it can energize and focus style. Mr. Osman's mural is sturdy and fine, his paintings of faux brickwork droll but no more—whereas *Here and There Wall* (2002), the lone sculpture on view, is dead-on, activating space in a deceptively simple and curious manner. As for Ms. Olivier, her coupling of chance incident and the utterly methodical gains in rigor, wit and authority the more it's contained: Compression does wonders for her. The recent paintings on panel, aligned on the vertical and measuring 24 by 18 inches, are her strongest work to date. Two of them—the abrupt classicism that is *House Arrest* (2002), and *First Among Equals* (also 2002), with its wan light and wandering drips—are among the most beautiful abstractions I've seen by a contemporary painter. Hard-headed yet flexible, smart and funky, Ms. Olivier is a formalist who likes to have fun—and her fun is serious business.

Wall: Jim Osman and Nancy Olivier is at Metaphor Contemporary Art, 70 Washington Street, Suite 1113, in Brooklyn until Dec. 15.